

# **The Effect of Teacher Immediacy on Students' Learning**

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# What is teacher immediacy?

Teacher immediacy, defined as *communication behaviors that reduce the perceived distance between teachers and students*, plays a bigger role in students' learning and motivation than you may think. Some aspects of teacher immediacy include:

- asking students how they feel about things
- calling students by their name
- moves around the classroom while teaching
- has relaxed body language
- uses terms like “we” and “us” when referring to the class
- gives feedback to students, etc.

A feeling of “oneness” with the teacher may make the students more motivated and determined to do their best.

# Problem

At one time or another, every student has had a stern, stubborn professor or teacher that they butted heads with. This may create a distracting and difficult environment to learn in. Is there a difference in students' motivation to learn and do well in their schoolwork for a professor that they like vs. a professor that they don't like?

- How does teacher immediacy affect students' academics?
- How does overall classroom environment affect learning?

# Proposed Response to Problem

## Articles:

- Maulana, R., Opdenakker, M., & Bosker, R. (2014). Teacher–student interpersonal relationships do change and affect academic motivation: A multilevel growth curve modelling. *British Journal Of Educational Psychology*.
  - This study investigates TSIR and links with academic motivation. Students' academic motivation is studied from the perspective of self-determination theory (Maulana, Opdenakker, Bosker, 2014, p. 459).
- Allen, M., Witt, P. L., & Wheelless, L. R. (2006). The role of teacher immediacy as motivational factor in student learning: Using meta analysis to test a causal model. *Communication Education*.
  - This report uses meta-analysis to derive correlations between the variables of teacher immediacy, cognitive learning, and affective learning. A model was constructed such that the perception of teacher immediacy, a behavior, generates an intermediate outcome of affect, a motivation, which in turn increases cognitive learning outcome (Allen, Witt, Wheelless, 2006, p. 21).

# Background

Through their study, Ridwan Maulana, Marie-Christine Opdenakker, and Roel Bosker aim to add knowledge to already existing research about this topic. They are investigating students' views on student-teacher interpersonal relationships and their motivation based on it (Maulana, Opdenakker, Bosker, 2014, p. 460).<sup>1</sup>

“The development of students' motivation results partly from their perception of the social climate in the classroom. Research has demonstrated that there is a clear link between students' attitude and teachers' encouragement and that an unfavourable social climate in the classroom can lead to a decline in students' motivation, disruptive behaviour, and a loss of mutual respect and support.” (Maulana, Opdenakker, Bosker, 2014, p. 463).<sup>2</sup>

In other words, having tension between the teacher and the students can create an environment in the classroom that is difficult to learn in because there is always tension. Having healthy teacher-student relationships can make a productive classroom environment and encourage student motivation. Students are more likely to try and do better in their schoolwork if they like and respect the teacher. If there is a mutual respect amongst the teacher and students, they will be more determined to do their best.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Introduce

<sup>2</sup> Insert

<sup>3</sup> Interpret

# Background

Mike Allen, Paul L. Witt and Lawrence R. Wheelless used meta-analysis to gather information about the influence of teacher immediacy on students' learning (Allen, Witt, Wheelless, 2006, p. 22).<sup>1</sup>

“Immediacy behaviors that a teacher displays in communicative acts and interactions with students, therefore, can be seen as rewarding. It follows that these rewarding behaviors may serve as reinforcement for the attentive behavior, feedback, and interaction from the student that increase affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning. Increasing the willingness of students to approach and engage in educational tasks is critical to the learning process.” (Allen, Witt, Wheelless, 2006, p. 22).<sup>2</sup>

Immediacy can have a big impact on the students and classroom environment in general. Positive immediacy can encourage the students to be more willing to participate, open to what's being taught, and not be afraid to seek help. If the teacher is not doing their best to be attentive, give feedback, and be open to questions then the students may be less inclined to please the teacher with good grades. It is rewarding for both the teacher and the student when they get good grades, so the teacher should be doing all they can to let them accomplish that.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> INtroduce

<sup>2</sup> INsert

<sup>3</sup> INterpret

# Findings

During class throughout the past 2 weeks I have been observing how my professors act towards the students and in general.

I have two kinds of professors: ones with a more stern and unapproachable personality and ones with an inviting and friendly personality.

As I sat in the classes with the more stern professors I observed that the students were more unwilling to answer questions aloud and ask questions to the professor. I saw some students lean to the person next to them and ask them their question instead of asking the professor. It is an overall more tense environment.

As I sat in the classes with the more approachable and friendly professors, the students were a lot more relaxed and willing to talk and ask questions to the professor.

Students do not learn as well if the classroom environment is tense. They may be more focused on how much they don't like the professor and their mind might be consumed with negative thoughts. Students will learn best when the classroom environment is relaxed and productive. Having this type of environment lets the students feel more comfortable getting help straight from the teacher which will in turn help their grades.

# Findings

## I interviewed two students about this topic:<sup>1</sup>

Q: Would a teacher being approachable make you more comfortable in the classroom than a teacher that is not approachable?

A: Yes. I like relaxed teachers opposed to strict ones.

Q: How has positive teacher immediacy helped your academics in your learning experience?

A: When I have teachers I like, I'm more inclined to seek help from them or have them re-explain something which helped me understand more.

Q: If you were to not like a teacher, would you be hesitant to go to his/her office hours?

A: Yes, first I would seek help from a student in the same class. If I totally did not understand it and my classmate couldn't help, I would go to the office hours.

Q: How comfortable would you be asking a question aloud in the classroom if your teacher was unfriendly?

A: Not very comfortable. I feel like they wouldn't make an effort to help me understand.<sup>2</sup>

Q: Would a teacher being approachable make you more comfortable in the classroom than a teacher that is not approachable?

A: Yes, if I had a teacher who is not approachable I would feel that I wouldn't be able to ask questions or be my complete self in the class.

Q: How has positive teacher immediacy helped your academics in your learning experience?

A: Teacher immediacy is important. When I have a teacher that knows everyone's name or is polite and respectful, I feel that they care more about their students.

Q: If you were to not like a teacher, would you be hesitant to go to his/her office hours?

A: Yes.

Q: How comfortable would you be asking a question aloud in the classroom if your teacher was unfriendly?

A: Not comfortable, I would feel that they would think I'm stupid or not paying attention.<sup>2</sup>



# Findings

(continued from the interviews) The students I interviewed both prefer relaxed teachers opposed to uptight ones. They both feel more comfortable asking questions in the classroom when the teacher is friendly. I feel like this is because the students may feel judged when asking unfriendly teachers questions about the work. The students I interviewed also would be hesitant to see the professor at his/her office hours if they felt uncomfortable with them.<sup>3</sup>

I took the approach of observing, interviewing and giving my personal experience because I feel as if that gives better proof. Through these methods I showed how not only I, but fellow students feel about this topic. I came at it at a more personal level by mainly displaying opinions from myself and others.

<sup>1</sup> INtroduce

<sup>2</sup> INsert

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# Findings

Based on my personal experience:

Last semester, I had a professor who was absolutely miserable. I dreaded going to every class I had with him. No one in my class was comfortable asking him questions because he made you feel stupid and did not give you a sufficient answer.

I didn't get a good grade in his class because I barely understood anything I was being taught (it was a tough class) and I never went to his office hours because I despised him.

In short, he did NOT display positive teacher immediacy and the classroom had a negative, tense feel. Both of these influences were detrimental to my grade. For the same class, if I had a professor who didn't act rude towards the students I would have sought help from him/her and my grades would not have been that negatively affected.

# Conclusion

Through the interviews that I conducted, I found that students feel uncomfortable in a tense classroom environment and not open to ask and answer questions aloud to the professor if they do not like them. If they like the professors, they are more willing to discuss questions they have with them.

I saw this demonstrated when I observed my professors and classmates in my classes. When there was more tension in the room, everyone was almost silent and hesitant to ask questions. In the laid back classrooms, asking questions is encouraged and easier to participate in. The students don't feel stupid or like they will be judged in the relaxed setting.

With my findings I support Maulana, Opdenakker, Bosker, Allen, Witt, and Wheelless's research studies. They found that teacher immediacy and approachableness is important to student success in the classroom. Asking questions if you don't understand something is vital to getting good grades. If you don't understand what you're being taught, you're more likely to not get a good grade and not do well on the homework.

Healthy teacher-student interpersonal relationships are beneficial to students' academics and overall performance in the classroom. It leads to better grades, better understanding, and a better learning experience in general.